

## Chapter One

When your best friend tells you she needs your help, you say yes. But if your best friend is Tally Greene, who has orange-and-red streaked hair (to match the autumn leaves); loves all animals to the point of obsession (even a prima donna albino vulture); and will do anything for a friend (including pretend to eat lard sandwiches), you might want to ask a few questions *before* saying yes.

Blake is quick to point out my mistake as he hands us our masks, goggles, and gloves. “Penny, this is Tally. You *always* ask more questions.”

“I can hear you, you know,” she says.

Blake smiles at her. “I know. All I’m saying is that not everyone is quite as willing to go to the lengths you do for the things you believe in.”

Tally frowns at him. “Since when is yard work *lengths*?”

“Tally,” I say, pulling on my gloves. “I don’t think you usually have to wear hazmat gear for yard work.”

Tally nods. Then she looks a little sheepish. “Are you mad?” she asks.

“Of course not,” I say. “Whatever it is, I’m in.”

For some reason, Blake finds this hysterical. “Oh, you’ll be *in* all right,” he says. He leads us around to the back of the barn.

“Well,” he says. “There you go.” He points toward a giant mound of deep brown soil.

We walk a little closer and I realize it’s not soil. It’s compost. Fresh, ripe compost. The brown dirt is marbled with clumps of manure and studded with bits and pieces of kitchen leftovers. Eggshells, lemon rinds, strawberry hulls, and lettuce leaves all peek out from between the clumps.

Tally makes a face. “I thought we were raking leaves.”

“There are leaves,” Blake says. “And there will be raking.” He grabs a couple of rakes leaning against the fence. “Mask up, ladies.”

I’d put my mask on as soon as I saw the pile. I might be a city girl, but I know manure when I smell it. I pull my goggles over my eyes and make sure my gloves are secure before taking the rake from Blake. Tally gives Blake one more dirty look before donning her protective gear. Blake quickly explains that we’re supposed to mix the piles of leaves and grass clippings into the big pile of compost.

“Got it,” Tally says.

“You have to really mix it well,” Blake says. “Otherwise the methane gas will build up and there could be an explosion.”

“That would be bad,” Tally says.

“That would be bad,” Blake confirms. “All right, then,” he says, nodding toward the pile. “You’re burning daylight.”

“Okay, bossy,” Tally says. She grabs her rake and stomps over to the pile. I start to tell her that stomping in fresh compost

probably isn't the best idea, but I'm too late. She hits a grapefruit rind with her heel and sends it rocketing to where Blake is standing. It smacks him in the chest. Even with the mask on, I can tell she's grinning.

Blake smirks and shakes his head. "I'll be back in a while to check on your progress." He starts walking away from us.

"Wait!" Tally calls. "Aren't you going to help us?"

"Nope," Blake says. "I have my own chores." He disappears around the end of the barn, leaving Tally and me and a giant pile of compost all alone.

"Guess we'd better—" Tally lifts one of her feet and examines the bottom of her borrowed boot. When she puts her foot down, it squelches. She looks at me. "Sorry," she says.

"It's fine," I say. "What's a little poop?" I lift a forkful of leaves and toss it onto the pile. "Besides," I say. "It's for a good cause."

Tally's latest big idea was to hire ourselves out to do odd jobs so that we can raise money for the ARK animal shelter. Monica, the ARK's director, wants to buy a backup generator for the exotics building. Without it, one power outage and the lizards and tropical birds could freeze to death. Even with the big discount Lancaster Hardware is giving her, a good generator is easily over three thousand dollars.

"You're a good friend, Penny Lane," Tally says, turning over a forkful of compost. (Yes, Penny Lane—my dad is a hardcore Beatles fan. I guess I'm just lucky he didn't name me Ringo.)

"I am a good friend. Aren't I?"

“And very humble,” she says.

“Humility when you’re as awesome as I am is very important,” I say. This makes Tally laugh.

“Hey!” Blake calls from the corner of the barn. “Get to work!” This makes Tally laugh even more, but we do as he instructs and get to work.

I’ve only lived in Hog’s Hollow for a few months—ever since my parents separated and my dad stayed in Manhattan and my mom and I moved here to live in the town where she grew up. In the short time I’ve been here, I’ve learned that Hog’s Hollow has to be one of the weirdest places on the planet. Just a few weeks ago, I walked an albino vulture in the Hog Days parade behind a trailer carrying the Hog Queen and her court. The parade route wound right through downtown, past the bank and the antique stores and The Cupcake Queen, my mom’s bakery.

I tried to ignore the dirty looks the Hog Queen was giving me. Charity Wharton, aka The Meanest Girl in the Known Universe, had, in spite of Tally’s best efforts, been picked as queen. Charity’s hated me from the start. At first it was just because my mom had been chosen over her mom for Hog Queen every year they were in high school together. Then it was because I was the cause of a cupcake tsunami at her birthday party. Then she hated me because Marcus, her longtime crush, ended up liking me more than her. Of course the fact that I walked in the parade with Marcus probably didn’t help any. But I’d stopped noticing her dirty looks when he’d started holding my hand.

After a while, Tally says, “I think we should take a break.”

“I agree,” I say. We’ve been raking and mixing and flipping for close to an hour. And it is hot. Tally and I walk over to one of the apple trees behind Blake’s house and sit in the shade. I slide my hands free of my gloves and pull off my mask and goggles. The cool breeze on my face feels good. Tally takes her gear off and lies back in the grass.

“Are you working on Saturn tonight with Marcus?” she asks.

I nod and lean back against the tree. Marcus and his dad are building a stunning to-scale model of the solar system to memorialize Marcus’s mother, who passed away almost two years ago. Saturn is the last of the planets to be built, but it is proving to be the most difficult, so Marcus called me this morning and asked if I would help. Building something that beautiful to honor Marcus’s mom is one of the most amazing things I’ve ever heard of. The planets, peeking through the trees, are massive. Saturn’s rings are over thirty feet in diameter and Jupiter stands over eighteen feet tall. At night if there’s a full moon, you can see the light glinting off of the copper stripes of Jupiter or the red iron of Mars.

“What are you doing tonight?” I ask Tally.

Tally shrugs. “Blake said something about a movie.”

“That sounds fun,” I say, wishing that Marcus had asked me to go to a movie. I mean, I like helping him and his dad, but other than the Hog’s Hollow dance after the parade, we’ve never actually gone on anything resembling a date.